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Did Amos approve the Calf-Worship at Bethel?

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“**A**ND Jeroboam took counsel, and made two calves of gold ; and he said unto the people, Go not up to Jerusalem any longer ; behold thine own God, O Israel, who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. . . . and this thing became a sin.”¹ So writes the exilian editor of the Book of Kings (1 Ki. xii. 28-30). His verdict is the verdict of history. There can be no doubt that the decline of religion in the northern kingdom and the corruption of morals which hastened its fall were mainly due to the sensualizing of the idea of God which this cult of Jeroboam fostered. Viewing this incident in the light of its sequel, the historian is fully warranted in declaring that “Jeroboam the son of Nebat made Israel to sin.”

At the same time he recognizes that it was not Jeroboam's intention to apostatize from the worship of Yahweh. The God whom he urged the people to worship at Bethel and Dan was no new deity, but the

¹ With the exception of these words the text of this passage is hopelessly obscure. Verse 29 in the Massoretic text reads, “And he set the one in Bethel, and the one put he in Dan,” but, according to v. 32, both of the calves were in Bethel, and there is no evidence in the writings of the prophets that there ever was a golden calf at Dan; on the contrary, Hos. x. 5 speaks of the “calves of Beth-aven.” The Massoretic text of 30^b reads, “And the people walked before the one unto Dan,” which is unintelligible. Klostermann (*Commentary on Kings*) reads in 28 with the LXX. אֱלֹהִים instead of אֱלֹהִים, which is a plausible correction. In 28 he changes the first הָאֱלֹהִים to הָאֱלֹהִים and the second הָאֱלֹהִים to הָאֱלֹהִים and translates, “Behold thine own Divinity, O Israel, who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and established the god at Bethel, and founded the ephod at Dan.” In 30^b he again reads הָאֱלֹהִים for הָאֱלֹהִים and translates, “And the people went to the ephod unto Dan (and ignored Bethel).” This ingenious emendation is approved by Farrar (*Expositor*, October, 1893, p. 264), but it does not seem to me to have any great probability. I must confess that I see no way of restoring the text. The writer's condemnation of the calf-worship is, however, clear, apart from the solution of this textual problem.

one who had brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt; that is, Yahweh himself. The bullock was not an image of the Egyptian Apis or Mnevis, but a primitive Semitic and primitive Hebrew symbol of the life-giving energy of the Godhead. That symbol had already found a partial recognition in the cherubic representations of the tabernacle and of Solomon's temple. At the time of the Exodus, the nation had made for itself a golden calf as an emblem of the power of the God who had just delivered it from Egypt. Jeroboam felt, therefore, that he was following ancient precedent, and was in no sense renouncing the worship of Yahweh, when he set up his golden calves in the northern kingdom.

The author of Kings, much as he condemns the calf-worship, nevertheless recognizes that it was a worship of Yahweh, and distinguishes it sharply from foreign Baal-worship (1 Ki. xxii. 53; 2 Ki. iii. 2 f.). So far as we know, Elijah and Elisha never attacked the cult established by Jeroboam. All their efforts were directed to stop the rising tide of Phœnician Baal-worship; and their message was, 'Choose ye between Yahweh and Baal,' not, 'Serve Yahweh in this way rather than another.' When Jehu undertook the reformation of religion in the northern kingdom, and annihilated foreign idolatry with fire and sword, he did not touch the sanctuary at Bethel, evidently regarding it as a legitimate centre of primitive Yahweh-worship (2 Ki. x. 28 f.).

From the time of Jehu onward, the people of the ten tribes considered themselves worshippers of Yahweh just as truly as the people of Judah. The book of Amos contains no accusations of foreign idolatry. It represents the dynasty of Jehu as still on the throne, and Yahweh-worship as the established religion of the state; and yet Bethel, the seat of the calf-worship, is the main temple of the kingdom, "the king's sanctuary and a royal house" (Am. vii. 13). Alongside of it Dan also enjoys esteem as a sacred place (Am. viii. 14), and Gilgal and Beersheba have become the homes of a similar cult (Am. iv. 4; v. 5). Apparently the Yahweh-worship at these sanctuaries was universally regarded as the original and legitimate religion of the northern kingdom.

Amos never once mentions the calves in the book of his prophecy, nor does he utter a single word which can fairly be construed as a direct condemnation of this form of worship. Silence, it is said, lends consent, and he apparently had no objection to the calf-symbolism in the worship of Yahweh. Such, at least, is the construction which is put upon his silence by leading modern critics. Well-

hausen (*Kleine Propheten*, p. 92) says, "For him (Amos) the golden calf is in no sense the radical sin of Israel; he never wages war against it; in fact, never attacks any detail of the cult." Cheyne (*Hosea*, p. 24) remarks, "Even Amos has not a word to say against these images" (the golden calves). Robertson Smith (*Prophets of Israel*, p. 175) speaks similarly. It would thus appear from our brief survey of the history of the northern kingdom, that the calf-worship enjoyed an undisturbed existence from the time of Jeroboam I. to the time of Amos, and that during this long period not one voice was raised in opposition to it as an illegitimate way of worshipping Yahweh.

The first positive historic evidence of antagonism to the calf-worship within the borders of Israel is found in the book of Hosea. Hosea takes the unequivocal position that it is idolatry, and that the service of the sanctuaries of Israel is apostasy from Yahweh. "Their silver and their gold have they made into idols for them, that it may be destroyed. Thy calf, O Samaria, is loathsome, my wrath is hot against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? For this also is of Israel's invention. A workman has made it, and it is no god. Yea, the calf of Samaria shall be broken to fragments" (Hos. viii. 4-6). The name Beth-'El, 'House of God,' Hosea habitually changes to Beth-'Aven, 'House of Delusion' (iv. 15; v. 8; x. 5). To worship at Gilgal and Bethel is to play the harlot (iv. 14). The calves at Bethel, in which the people of Samaria trust, shall become an object of terror (x. 5). These passages make it perfectly clear that, whatever might be the belief of the nation in general, Hosea regarded the calf-worship with intense hostility.

Such a fully developed antagonism is very surprising in Hosea, in view of the fact that we have found nothing of the sort in the earlier history. In him religious thought apparently passes at a leap from complete approval to complete disapproval, without going through the intermediate stages of criticism or suspicion of the correctness of established beliefs. Is it probable that this was the fact? The analogy of history teaches the contrary. Great religious revolutions, such as Hosea's change of attitude towards the calves, do not come in a moment, but are the culmination of a long development of human thought. We are led, therefore, to suspect that the approval of the calf-worship by Hosea's predecessors is more apparent than real, and that their silence on this subject has another explanation than that they saw nothing to blame in this way of worshipping Yahweh; that possibly the germ of Hosea's antagonism was already

present in the minds of Elijah and Elisha, but that they did not publicly condemn the calf-symbolism, because they thought that it would be time enough to attempt a reformation *within* the religion of Yahweh, after the religion of Baal had been finally defeated.

Particularly in the case of Amos, it is almost impossible to believe that his failure to condemn the calf-worship explicitly is due to approval of this institution. Amos was a contemporary of Hosea, and the end of his ministry can hardly have fallen more than ten years before Hosea began to preach. Hosea took up the word of the Lord where Amos had left off, and in all main points his theology is that of his predecessor. He must either have heard Amos preach or have read his book, for he shows numerous coincidences both in thought and in expression (cf. Hos. iv. 3 & Am. viii. 8; Hos. iv. 15 & Am. v. 5; Hos. v. 5, vii. 10 & Am. viii. 7; Hos. viii. 14b & Am. ii. 5; Hos. ix. 3 & Am. vii. 17; Hos. x. 8 & Am. vii. 9; Hos. xii. 7 f. & Am. viii. 5). Hosea's peculiar renaming of Bethel as the "House of Delusion" is based upon the word of Amos, v. 5, that "Bethel shall prove itself a delusion." In view of his close dependence upon Amos, it is difficult to think that there were not some anticipations of his antagonism to the calves in the teaching of his predecessor.

Is there any other way, then, in which the silence of Amos in regard to the golden calves may be explained, besides the hypothesis that he sanctioned this mode of worshiping Yahweh? In the abstract this hypothesis is, of course, perfectly tenable, for people are far more apt to speak of things which they do not approve than of things which they do approve; but in this concrete instance it is fraught with difficulty, and it is by no means the only theory which can be framed to explain the phenomena.

Suppose that Amos regarded the whole religion of the northern kingdom as so corrupt as no longer to be entitled to the name of worship of Yahweh, then his failure to mention the calves might be due to the fact that he regarded them as simply one feature in a system which, although nominally the worship of Yahweh, was practically heathenism. One might search the writings of the Protestant Reformers without finding any special polemic against the worship of the Virgin as the Mother of Sorrows with seven swords in her heart; but that would not show that they approved of this cult, but simply that they rejected Mariolatry in its entirety, and that, therefore, they did not trouble themselves to antagonize one particular phase of this debased form of Christianity. In a precisely similar way, if it can be shown that Amos regarded the god who was worshiped at Bethel as

another than Yahweh, we have a satisfactory explanation of the fact that he did not trouble himself with the minor question, whether or no this god should be worshiped under the form of a calf. That this was actually Amos's position, I wish now to prove.

It is conceded by all critics that Amos antagonizes the popular conception of Yahweh as radically false. His book makes it plain that the majority of the nation thought of Yahweh in much the same way as the Canaanites thought of Baal. Heathen religion had nominally been cast out; in reality it had permeated the religion of Yahweh. For the Israel of that day, Yahweh was nothing more than the patron-god of their race. It is true that they believed him to be more powerful than the deities of other peoples; for he had defeated the gods of Egypt, had led his people in triumph out of that country, and had conquered the land of Canaan: at the same time they regarded him as essentially similar in character to Baal, and Chemosh, and Molech, the patron-gods of their neighbors. In other words, Yahweh was conceived to have very much the same nature as an earthly king, and the popular creed was summed up in the words, "Yahweh is with us" (v. 14).

This fundamental belief, that Yahweh was the tutelary god of Israel, showed itself in three forms: first, in the conviction that he loved Israel and hated other nations, so that he would always protect it and would always destroy its enemies; second, that sacrifices and offerings were a sure avenue to his favor, so that if at any time he manifested his displeasure, he could easily be placated by a more scrupulous observance of the ceremonies of religion (iv. 4 f.; v. 21 f.; viii. 10 f.); third, that the day of Yahweh, the turning point in the world's history of which the older prophets had spoken, would bring only blessing and glory to Israel (v. 18).

These three aspects of the popular misconception of the nature of God are successively combated by Amos in the first three sections of his book (i. 2-iv. 3; iv. 4-v. 17; v. 18-vi. 14). Over against the idea of Yahweh, the national God of Israel, he sets the idea of Yahweh, the "God of hosts." Whatever may have been the primitive meaning of this name, there can be no doubt that he uses it in the sense of "God of the universe." The "hosts" are the great groups of inanimate, animate, and spiritual existences which God has created and which obey his rule.

This is proved by the connection in which he introduces this favorite designation of Yahweh. In iv. 13 he gives, as it were, a catalogue of God's wonderful dealings in creation and providence,

and sums it up in the words, "Whose name is Yahweh the God of hosts" (cf. the similar connection in ix. 5, 6). In the very significant passage v. 14 sq., the God of hosts is set in formal contrast to the patron-god of Israel: "Seek good and not evil that ye may live. Then shall Yahweh the God of hosts be with you as ye say that he is with you." In iii. 13 the name is introduced along with the call to the Philistines to testify against the nobles of Samaria, in witness of the fact that Yahweh is the God of the heathen as well as of Israel. In v. 27 the prediction that God will carry Israel captive beyond Damascus is followed by the words, "whose name is Yahweh the God of hosts," to show that the most distant regions are under his control as much as the land of Israel. In vi. 14, the name is used in connection with the sending of a nation (the Assyrians) upon Israel. (See also v. 16; vi. 8.) This study of the way in which Amos uses the title "God of hosts" makes it plain that by it he wishes to designate Yahweh as the God of the whole world, in contrast to the local, national god of current Israelitish theology.

Amos seems to have been led to this lofty conception of the nature of Yahweh through a contemplation of the wonderful course of nature and of human history. He comes singularly close to the modern conception of the reign of law. In iii. 2-5, he expresses his conviction of the uniform sequence of cause and effect in words which may be paraphrased thus: 'Nothing in the world occurs without a cause. If two people are seen walking together, it is a sign that they have met. If a lion roars in the forest, it is a sign that he has found his prey; or if he growls in his den, that he has caught something. If a bird falls into a trap on the earth, it is because a snare has been set for it. If a trap flies up from the ground, it is because something has been caught in it. If the trumpet is blown in a city, people know that it is because of danger and they are afraid.' Following back this idea of causality to its logical conclusion, Amos grasps the thought that Yahweh is the great first cause of all things. 'If calamity befalls a city,' he continues (iii. 6), 'Yahweh must have caused it.' 'He has formed the mountains and created the wind, He reads the secret thought in the heart of man, He eclipses the sun when it has just risen, He is exalted above all that is high on earth, His name is Yahweh the God of hosts' (iv. 13). 'He has formed the Pleiades and Orion, He changes darkness to dawn and daylight back to night, He raises the tides of the sea and makes them overflow the land' (v. 8). 'He touches the earth and it is shaken with an earthquake and all its inhabitants mourn, He makes the solid ground rise and

fall like the rising and falling of the Nile, He has built his abode in the heavens and has founded his vault of the sky upon the earth' (ix. 5, 6). Such is Amos's conception of Yahweh, and to the most superficial observer it is evident that it is fundamentally different from the conception which was cherished by the Israel of his day.

A number of recent critics find it incredible that Amos should have attained so high a degree of spiritual insight, and therefore, they reject as glosses the three passages which I have just quoted. From the point of view of their theory of the development of the religion of Israel, it is incredible. Amos marks for them the beginning of the characteristic prophetic tendency of thought; and if this be true, it is, of course, impossible that he should have reached at a leap such an eminence of thought in regard to the nature of Yahweh. Here, however, they assume that their dating of the rest of Old Testament literature is established; while, in fact, such passages as this are one of the great factors in the solution of that problem.

Some plausibility is given to the idea that v. 8 is interpolated from the fact that there is a break in the construction of the sentence at this point, but Gunning (*De Godspraken van Amos*, p. 99) has shown conclusively, I think, that this is due to the interpolation, not of verse 8, but of verse 7. The words of this verse, "who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth," are singularly irrelevant and have all the marks of a marginal gloss which has been added with reference to vi. 12.

Apart from this, there is no evidence against the genuineness of these passages except a foregone conclusion as to the way in which the Old Testament religion has developed; while, on the other hand, the internal evidence is strongly in their favor. The name, "God of hosts," in iv. 13, is the one which, as we have seen, Amos uses habitually. Its introduction in the phrase, "whose name is Yahweh the God of hosts," is paralleled in v. 27. The idea of Yahweh's revelation of his thought to man in this verse is the same as in iii. 7. The expression, "maketh the morning darkness," can only refer to an eclipse. This is alluded to also in viii. 9, "I will cause the sun to go down at noon and will darken the earth in the clear day," and it is a plausible conjecture that the reference is to the total eclipse of the sun in the year 763 B.C. which is recorded in the Assyrian Eponym Canon. The allusion in ix. 5 is unquestionably to an earthquake; and nothing could be more favorable to the idea that Amos wrote the verse, for in i. 1 he tells us that he began to prophecy two years before the great earthquake that came in the reign of Uzziah,

and his book is full of incidental allusions to this event (cf. ii. 13; iv. 11; vi. 11; viii. 8; ix. 1, 5).

Moreover, in each of these cases the elimination of the passage takes the keystone out of the arch of Amos's argument. His conclusion that Israel cannot escape judgment depends upon the premise that Yahweh is infinitely exalted. Take this away, and his argument has no validity. For my part, I cannot see how we are to explain the fact that Amos antagonized all the most cherished beliefs and practices of his age, unless we assume that he had a higher idea of God than that held by his age. The critics who deny the genuineness of these passages seek to bring the theology of Amos down to the level of the theology of his times, and yet they admit that he opposes the practices of his times. This, it seems to me, makes his attitude psychologically inexplicable. The man who lives above the general level and who devotes himself to lifting others to a higher life, is not the man who thinks on the general level, but one who has attained a vision of higher truth. In these passages, therefore, and in these alone, is found an adequate explanation of the character and of the mission of Amos.

It is clear that this lofty, theistic conception of Amos which we have just traced was diametrically opposed to the national, particularistic idea of Yahweh which was cherished by the Israelites. The only question, then, is, How far did Amos go in his antagonism to the national religion? Did he regard it as corrupt, but still a genuine worship of Yahweh, or had the degradation of the idea of Yahweh gone so far that it could no longer be said that He was worshiped by Israel? A study of the prophet's words shows that he took the latter view. The contrast between the Yahweh of reality, as Amos had come to know him, and the Yahweh of contemporary Israelitish thought was so wide, that Amos saw that the religion of the northern kingdom could not be spoken of even as a perverted worship of Yahweh, but that the god of this religion, although he bore the name of Yahweh, was no better than a false god. The Yahweh of hosts was a wholly different being from the Yahweh of Bethel, and worship of the latter was as truly apostasy as the worship of the Tyrian Baal or of the Ammonite Chemosh.

This extreme position is taken clearly in viii. 14, "They that swear by the 'sin' of Samaria and that say, As thy God, O Dan, liveth; and, As the 'way' of Beersheba liveth; even they shall fall and never rise up again." The words "sin" and "way" are doubtless later substitutions for Adonay, Ba'al, or some other colorless name of God,

nevertheless the original sense of the passage is plain enough. Those who worship the god of Samaria and of Dan and of Beersheba are not recognized by Yahweh as his worshipers, and will be punished by him as apostates. Similarly in v. 4 f., "Seek ye me, and ye shall live; but seek not Bethel nor come to Gilgal, and pass not over to Beersheba: for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity and Bethel shall prove itself a delusion. Seek Yahweh, and ye shall live." These words assert in the most unmistakable manner that Yahweh is not the god who is worshiped at the sanctuaries of Israel, and that this god shall suffer the same fate as the idols of the heathen.

In the light of these utterances we must explain the much discussed passage iv. 4 sq., "Come to Bethel and apostatize; to Gilgal and add to your apostasy; and bring your sacrifices in the morning, your tithes three days later, and offer a praise offering of leavened bread, and promise freewill offerings with a loud voice; for this pleases *you*, O ye children of Israel, saith Yahweh Elohim." This cannot mean that the worship at Bethel and Gilgal is genuine Yahweh-worship, although God is displeased with the illegal way in which the sacrifices are performed: the language is much too strong for that. The cult at Bethel is not a perversion of Yahweh's worship, it is apostasy from it. In the larger question, whether Yahweh is worshiped at all by the Israelites, Amos is absorbed and has no time for the discussion of the minor question, with what ceremonies He should be served.

Nor can this passage be interpreted as a polemic against the value of sacrifice. That comes in v. 21 sq., but not here. If the prophet had meant to say that Yahweh regarded sacrifice as no better than apostasy, he would have said, "Offer your sacrifices in the morning and apostatize," not, "Come to Bethel and apostatize." The evil attacked here is a graver one than a false estimate of the value of sacrifice. It is the evil of worshiping under the name of Yahweh another god than Yahweh. The service of these sanctuaries is pleasing to the Israelites, but it is not pleasing to Yahweh, because he does not regard it as paid to him. This is indicated clearly in the following verses (6-11). He has sent famine, drought, blight, locusts, pestilence, war, earthquake, upon them in token of his wrath, but they have not returned to him. This does not mean that they have not repented and given him new lives instead of sacrifices, as is the thought in ch. v., but that they have not given up the false Yahweh of Bethel and Gilgal and returned to the true Yahweh, the God of hosts. Therefore, because they have all the time been wor-

shipping a god of their own imagination, they must now prepare to meet the judgment of the God of the universe (12-13).

The same thought underlies i. 2: "Yahweh shall roar from Zion and utter his voice from Jerusalem"; not from one of the sanctuaries of the northern kingdom, because he does not dwell in them or recognize them as his. So also ii. 8, "In the house of their god they drink wine bought with money gained by usury." That is to say, the place where they worship is *their* temple, but Yahweh does not recognize it as his. Nowhere in the book does Yahweh speak of one of the Israelitish sanctuaries as "my house" (cf. vii. 9, "the sanctuaries of Israel"). In iii. 14 the Lord says, "I will also visit the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and shall fall to the ground." This can only mean that the entire cult at Bethel is repugnant to Yahweh. Wellhausen, it is true, pronounces this passage a gloss, but on no sufficient grounds. In i. 5 and in vii. 9 the ruin of the nation and the ruin of its temples are combined in precisely the same way as they are here.

The annihilation of the cult at Bethel and the destruction of those who worship there are also predicted in ix. 1-4. The sense in which this is to be understood is clear from the verses which immediately precede and which immediately follow. In viii. 14 the national religion is declared to be apostasy from the religion of Yahweh. In these verses the judgment which shall fall upon the worshipers at Bethel is depicted. The prophet sees Yahweh standing by the altar of the temple at Bethel on a feast day when the house is full of people, and hears him command that it be shaken with an earthquake from top to bottom, that it may fall in ruins upon the heads of the worshipers. This he explains to mean that not one of those who worship the god of Bethel shall escape. Though they hide in the most inaccessible places, Yahweh will search them out and give them up to the destroyer. Then follows, in contrast to the false Yahweh, whose devotees are to be destroyed, the thought of the true Yahweh, the creator and preserver of the world (5, 6) and the director of human history (7). Here again it is evident that the prophet rejects the religion of the northern kingdom as a whole.

We conclude, therefore, that Amos's opposition to the religion of his day was not directed against the details of that religion, but against its most fundamental idea, the idea of God. He declares that the popular idea of God is so utterly erroneous that Israel is no longer worshipping Yahweh, but a figment of its own imagination. Consequently, everything about the services of its sanctuaries, its

sacrifices, its offerings, its music, is wrong, because rendered in worship of a false god. If this be so, then Amos does not speak of the calves for the same reason that he does not speak of the constitution of the priesthood or the ritual of sacrifice. They were merely one element in a religion which he rejected in its entirety. The whole includes the part, and if the cult at Bethel and Dan was essentially evil, there was no need to expatiate on the evil of one form of that cult.

Hosea mentions the calves but thrice, and in these cases quite incidentally. The polemic against them is not the fundamental thought of his preaching. His fundamental thought, like that of Amos, is that the Yahweh whom Israel worships is no better than a Baal. The calves are named only as one feature of a radically corrupt system. If he had chanced not to mention them in these places, it would be quite as easy to say of him as to say of Amos that he did not object to the calf-worship. Consequently, there is no reasonable doubt that if Amos had happened to express an opinion in regard to the calves, he would have spoken in the same way as Hosea.